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The Female Latrine

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THE FEMALE LATRINE

I fumbled in the dark and found my tennis shoes under the cot. Our unit had been in Kuwait for three days. A light shone at the end of the tent; Hernandez, ever awake, flipped through songs on her iPod. The screen illuminated her face as she stared at her choices. Most of the fourteen women between us hid deep in their sleeping bags, lulled to sleep by the industrial air conditioner. We had two more weeks to sit and sleep and waste our time until we flew north into Iraq. I reached for an air duct overhead. The pliable canvas guided me through a maze of cots and duffle bags and body armor to the door.

Warm air wrapped around the exposed skin of my arms and legs as I shuffled my bare feet into stiff, sand-laden shoes. The desert night held no breeze, no movement whatsoever. Tent after tent cast evenly spaced shadows on the sand. They ticked past as I walked. At two in the morning, no one walked among the tents and shadows. No one saw my untucked shirt, messy hair, and untied shoes. One hundred and twelve steps, a wide curve around the last tent, where sand drifted deep enough to make feet slide. Seventy-eight more steps. Past the male latrine, askew on columns of gray cinder blocks. Four stairs. At three in the morning, the female latrine was all mine.

Dysentery.

I'd expected something better, something grander for my second deployment, but my body failed. Something in the ice, maybe the water, maybe the fruit, had seeped into my body and into those of my friends. We found ourselves running for the latrine, condemning Kuwait and the goddamn Kuwaiti crud. Days passed. Back and forth. Tent to latrine and back. Again. Our deployment began not with gunshots and explosions but with the quiet violence of a parasite.

I slept and read and avoided the chow hall.

During the day, a young Egyptian woman stood with her back at an angle to the sinks. Six days a week, ten hours a day, she cleaned the limited space—eight showers and six bathroom stalls. When groups of women filled the space and let water escape their showers as they yelled and reveled at the

end of their day, she patiently eased the puddles toward a drain with a giant squeegee. She kept everything in order. She also prayed there, in that latrine. Rolling out her burgundy prayer rug before the last stall, she stood and knelt, stood and knelt. I felt ashamed to rush through the door while she prayed. I left if I could, but I didn't have much control.

Rumors circled that units of our type were being rerouted to Afghanistan, a surge imminent. The Army lives on rumors. We were a unit of logisticians—paper-pushers and cooks, supply sergeants and ammo-dogs. Our commander explained the job to our families as the Walmart deployment. Our unit—a Combat Sustainment Support Battalion—would control all the companies that managed the warehouses for a vast majority of Iraq. Our jobs were far from the front lines. The joke went like this: if our unit ever needed to clear a building or assault an enemy position, then Iraq had fallen. Afghanistan held the action; Iraq trudged forward. Our weapons would never be fired in anger or fear.

I toured the camp's latrines in an effort not to shit myself. Some were air-conditioned, like any public bathroom in the States. Others, more commonly, were high-traffic, well-vandalized Porta-Johns. Green, yellow, blue. Calm colors that spotted the horizon. You could smell them fifty meters away: a mix of rotting sewage and the pungent cleaning agents sprayed inside twice a day. Pornographic drawings covered the walls. Names and dates of previous users. Inside jokes. The occasional illicit solicitation. Full paragraphs about the injustice of Army life. Chuck Norris jokes. *Chuck Norris CAN believe it's not butter. There is no chin behind Chuck Norris's beard. There is only another fist.* Chuck Norris jokes weren't that funny over 130 degrees.

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Members of my unit passed the time as best they knew how. Jocks swarmed the gym. They ran and flexed and lifted weights. Computer kids tucked themselves into USO tents with movies and video games. Parents woke in the middle of the night to call home, reaching out to children still unable to understand the distance, unable to understand a year, that a year was not forever. With a delay of several seconds, parents tried to get beyond *how are you* and *what's new?* Kids forgot to wait for the delay. They spoke on top of their parents, around their own gasps for air. Parents made soft noises of agreement so as not to disrupt a string of stories and anecdotes and words.

They listened. They waited for a chance to speak, a moment of silence. *Good night, I love you.*

I was lucky to be a Staff Sergeant in a battalion-level unit. If I had been at the company level, my responsibilities would have been more immediate. I would have had soldiers to keep track of and platoon obligations. I would have worried about what kept the lower-enlisted girls out so late at night. Where does a twenty-year-old spend her evenings in the desert? But in a unit with more officers than privates, NCOs were easy to come by, and I had no soldiers directly assigned to me. Those girls were someone else's worry. I could wallow in my sickness without the guilt of shirked responsibilities.

I resigned myself to days on a sandy cot in the female tent.

A profound tiredness stretched across my chest, settled in my joints. I waited for discomfort to present itself, a roiling somewhere deep in my abdomen, a sudden ache. My shoes sat ready, my weapon within reach. Never leave your weapon behind. Be ready.

122 The wind picked up, slamming outer layers of canvas against the tent frame, kicking up dust from every crevice, a dust so fine it smelled like smoke. When it settled, I could feel grains on my face and the pages of my book. The tent grew warmer and warmer. I stopped to shake out the book before turning the page.

The plywood door scraped against the entryway. I knew the steps belonged to our battalion executive officer, Major Acree, even before she pushed past the inner tent flap. Women in my tent had become predictable—meals, gym, movies, showers, sleep. Major Acree went to the 1300 movie every day: *Kung Fu Panda*, *You Don't Mess with the Zohan*, *Iron Man*. Movies still in the theaters back home. Movies most soldiers had never heard of but sat through anyway. She didn't care what movie played; that tent was cool and dark, and she could hide for hours.

She entered our tent with slow, heavy footsteps.

"Hey, Abbott," she said.

"Hi, ma'am. How was the movie?"

"Oh, I don't know," she said dismissively as she pulled her 9mm pistol from the holster at her side, dropping it onto the cot. The weapon bounced slightly, thudding against the tight green canvas. "I sat close enough to the light of the door to do my crossword."

"Fair enough," I said, sitting up and swinging my feet to the floor. My hips popped and groaned, stiff with inactivity. Speaking to her while lying down felt disrespectful. Our unit had relaxed more than some—privates were friends with sergeants, and we held formations only when necessary—but our basic military discipline remained. We didn't use first names. We saluted. Said *yes, ma'am* and *yes, sir*. Rules and order created comfort, something consistent we could rely on.

"How are you doing?" she asked, lowering herself onto her cot, no more than four feet from mine, hands on her knees to brace the weight of her body. This would be Major Acree's fifth deployment, her third to Iraq. She'd left behind three young children, none over the age of twelve. Her husband filled both of their roles, packing lunches, attending sporting events, rounding everyone up for morning and weekend calls from Mom.

"Not awesome, but I almost finished another book," I said, holding up the dog-eared novel I'd been clutching to my chest. It wasn't something I would remember, but it held the place of the hours in the day. "I've pretty much picked over the USO bookshelves."

"That's not such a bad problem. Just keep drinking water."

"Yes, ma'am."

She leaned back on her cot, unsnapped the top button of her trousers, and opened the *Stars and Stripes* newspaper. I hung my head, stretching the muscles in the back of my neck, before lying down as another gust of wind covered us in dust.

The modern latrine near the recreation center—still just a trailer but far more sophisticated than the Porta-Johns—was less inviting than the latrine by my tent. The steps seemed steeper. The door less willing to open. Three or four women sat in the small space each day, though they never seemed to do any work. As I walked in, clipped Arabic phrases flew from one end of the trailer to the other. A woman sitting on the last sink gestured passionately to another washing her feet in the showers. Conversation broke as the door opened. They glared at me. I kept my eyes down and entered the first bathroom stall. Their voices rose again, louder it seemed, as I clicked the lock and set my weapon in the corner.

For six days, I couldn't lose sight of the nearest latrine.

We'd done most of our training in the States, so my sickness didn't keep me from much. For months we filled the classrooms and fields of Fort McCoy, Wisconsin, training like something other than noncombat troops. The kind of training kids imagine when they play army. The kind of training that involved running through fields in full gear and shooting guns we would never shoot again. The kind of training that let us feel like real soldiers.

On our last day of Wisconsin field training, I sat in a soft-side Humvee and called in incident reports to my chain of command. I was coordinating movements and supplies for all my troops. I was in charge of the battlefield. When training for something you'll never actually do, the logic goes, why not let the eager Staff Sergeant be in charge? The simulated base came under fire. Fake protesters attacked. Car bombs detonated. Soldiers ran out of ammunition and water. The oak trees around us provided shade and cover for our imaginary enemies. Beside me in the sweltering truck, Sergeant Anna Bruski acted as my radio operator. Bruski and I were scheduled to be roommates once we landed in Iraq. We had so much in common—Midwestern, twenty-four-year-old NCOs both serving our second tours—that the pairing was obvious. Sitting in that sealed Humvee, we looked as if we'd been dunked in water. Heat was the only aspect of the training that transferred to our deployment. My uniform had soaked through. The canvas seat beneath me had turned a darker shade of green. We'd been told—as part of the training, the game, whatever you want to call it—that if we kept the doors closed and the windows up, our truck would function as a reinforced bunker. No one could get us. No boogeymen insurgents could compromise our position.

As I wiped sweat out of my eyes six hours into the exercise, a trainer opened my door and popped a smoke grenade. "Boom, both of you are down," he said and threw injury cards at us. The card in my lap had a picture of a bloody eye and said *You are injured and unconscious*.

"Call main and get the ammunition out here," I yelled to Bruski as smoke from the grenade filled the truck.

"My card says I have no arms," she said.

"No, Sergeant, you've both been hit," said the trainer.

"Call them," I repeated and glared at the man standing beside my door. He looked as if he'd just stepped from an air-conditioned office. Bruski clicked the radio on and asked for assistance. They'd been calling injuries all day to give our medics training in evacuation. You must accept the rules of the training exercise as the new rules of your life. If they say you must defend

your base through eight hours of imaginary assaults, then goddamnit that base will be defended. If you follow the rules, you can move on; you can go back to the barracks and breathe.

A military ambulance arrived—a Humvee configured to hold four stretchers in the back—and we were loaded in. I let myself relax. The air outside wasn't nearly as thick as the air in the truck. Blue sky peeked through the tangle of branches overhead. I felt like I was losing the game.

Bruski fainted on the way to the aid station. She'd been drinking water but not enough. They hooked each of us up to a small IV bag and gave us each a piece of chocolate. The fluid cooled my body. I felt my brain open up. My thoughts felt clearer, my hands steadier. Maybe I hadn't had enough water, either. I might have lost the game, but that seemed to be the point. My training was over. Another soldier took my position in the Humvee.

At least we didn't have to play those games in Kuwait's August heat.

Mixon, who volunteered to deploy with me, came down with dysentery too. Mixon was a big guy, a father of three, not used to skipping meals. After eight days of not eating, we decided to go to dinner: rice and chicken and red peppers and tomatoes. Our stomachs clenched. Half an hour after my first bite, I ran for the Porta-Johns outside where Mixon had already retreated.

A thin stream of light seeped through the air vent at the top of the door. I could hear soldiers walking by, but I couldn't see a thing. The Porta-John blindfold. I tried to breathe through my mouth. I tried to make the minutes pass as my stomach settled.

"I'm going back to my tent...if I can make it," Mixon said from outside. The door of his Porta-John bounced closed. He slung his weapon across his body and the sling creaked. "You all right?"

"Yeah, I'm just gonna hang out here. Take in the sights."

"Good luck."

I lost ten pounds. My uniform hung from my hips. The next day, the commander ordered me to the medical clinic across post. I waited beneath tattered sunshades as the desert's desiccated aroma fell away. A Taco Bell trailer pumped the smells of hot grease and beef and cheese into the air. I rolled the smell in my mouth, picturing melted cheese, wilted lettuce, and sour cream on top of greasy beef.

The aide called me inside.

A Navy corpsman checked my blood pressure and temperature. He asked all those medical questions they ask. *Do you smoke or drink? Could you be pregnant?* No, nothing out of the ordinary, I told him, just a well-versed knowledge of the camp's latrines. He smiled and walked away to check with the doctors.

My boots swung above the swirls and knots of the worn plywood floor; I felt like a cheat and a failure. I knew my commander and others in the unit suspected us of faking. I felt it. Shame weighed heavy on my mind. What an odd and embarrassing way to die. To let my body fall victim to something I could have controlled. For that man in uniform to show up at my mother's door, not because I had served my country but because I liked ice in my Pepsi. My mind began the story over and over. The car pulling into the driveway. No, he parks in the street. A uniformed man no one had ever seen before. Would he tell the truth? Or tout the party line, the grateful nation bit? I couldn't focus. My body couldn't handle Kuwait. How would I survive Iraq?

A young captain returned with the corpsman. He was handsome in a way only Navy men can be, his hair longer than a soldier's, almost civilian-like, parted far to the right. A timeless, clean-cut young man. He could have treated my uncles or grandfathers in previous wars.

"Sergeant Abbott?"

"Yes, sir." I sat up and reached out my hand to shake his. He took it and smiled, looking into my eyes.

"You've been ill for about a week, it seems?"

"Yes, sir."

"Your blood pressure looks a little low, but that's probably normal for someone your size." He looked at me, and I shrugged. "There's really nothing for us to do at this point. We don't know if this strain is bacterial or viral. Just stay hydrated as best you can. Take some ibuprofen if you feel uncomfortable. If it lasts more than twelve days, go ahead and come back."

"Yes, sir."

I volunteered for this, I reminded myself. I volunteered to join the Army, and I volunteered to deploy. Deployment was the goal; dysentery might as well have been in my enlistment contract.

The next morning, as the sun rose behind me, I sat on a low cement barrier and waited for my friend James, the other member of our volunteering spree.

He spent most of each night on the phone with his new wife. They fought, and she worried. She was pregnant with their first child. She wished he were home. She wished he paid more attention to her. She wished he had never slept with, touched, talked to another girl in his entire life. He listened and didn't sleep. The cloudless sky slipped from night to a pale, hazy dawn. Men began to shuffle from their tents with towels over their shoulders and shaving kits in hand. They squinted, grimaced against a new day.

James and I had been in Kuwait together for our first deployment four years earlier, young reservists called to serve in a young and contentious war. We were twenty then and had felt like adults. As the war intensified, we watched thousands of soldiers flow in and out of our camp, on to Iraq. Being deployed adjacent to a war zone felt like training for a skydive, then being barred from the plane. You watched the safety videos. You dealt with the fear that rises up in your chest at the thought of throwing your body from a moving plane and hurtling towards the ground. You mastered perfect form. You even grasped the basic physics of a body in free fall. All the same, no plane for you. No jump. Tuck that knowledge away.

Finally, we would cross that border; we would be allowed on the plane.

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James and I shouldn't have been friends. None of our civilian interests aligned. When we weren't in uniform, we drifted apart—but in uniform, we were best friends. Good enough friends that people assumed we were sleeping together. He checked on me when I was sick. I covered for him when he needed to call his wife. He was my brother. We had promised, after that first tour, never to deploy without each other. I loved him. He walked through the barriers, shifting his M249 machine gun—at twenty-two pounds, a weapon twice as heavy as my M16—before letting it settle back on its sling as we started toward breakfast. He looked composed. His uniform was clean, his hair still barely more than stubble, and he had shaved recently enough to avoid comment. That wasn't always the case; the stress of life back home had the tendency to affect his military bearing. We walked in silence. Our boots crunched sand against rock.

The dining facility was small and served mostly coalition troops—British, Korean, Australian, and Romanian troops, and a couple of others whose uniforms I could not identify. The ceiling felt low. A hundred folding tables with tablecloths—blue and yellow bunches of flowers—stretched from the serving line to dumpsters at the end of the building. James dug through boxes of cereal, and I chose a table next to a television playing Hillary Clinton's

speech from the previous day's 2008 Democratic National Convention. I unslung my M16 and placed it under my chair.

James set his tray down across from me—his plate heaped with eggs, pancakes and fruit, two boxes of cereal, three individual jugs of whole, shelf-stable milk—and hefted the 249 from his shoulders. I looked at the televised convention and back to my tray of toast and water.

The toast was delicious.

I began to think I would have dysentery forever. After ten days, I chose to stop eating, a partial cure, the only way to stay still long enough to watch a movie. So long as I could stay hydrated, I would be okay.

Our unit—all seventy-eight of us—walked a mile across the sand to hear another briefing, the same briefing we always heard, on improvised explosive devices. IEDs were everywhere, getting more powerful every day, ripping through engine compartments, flipping heavily armored trucks, piercing windows, doors, and bodies. We knew this. A thousand steps to hear what we knew, what many had seen firsthand.

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"I have hearing damage because of an IED," our civilian instructor announced, as if to qualify himself. We smiled at each other. Everyone in the Army has hearing damage. My ears had been ringing for four years, not because of an IED but from Army life: weapons firing and diesel trucks and living so close to a two-ton generator that its vibrations lulled me to sleep at night. Hearing loss meant nothing.

We stared at PowerPoint slides: images of trash on the roadside, unexploded ordnance, common signage. Everything was suspect. The man pulled up a video clip—a low-resolution camera focused on a desolate Iraqi road through the windshield of an up-armored Humvee. We had seen it before; it was one of my favorites. It gave me hope both for how much we could survive and for how irrational our enemy could be. Two men talked calmly, almost inaudibly. The image centered on another military vehicle fifty meters ahead driving past nothing, no homes or fields, no farmers with carts or battered cars. Just desert. Suddenly the asphalt before them lifted in six-foot-wide chunks, as if an animal were trying to surface from the depths of the earth. The road and soil erupted thirty feet into the air, missing both vehicles. An IED buried too deep. A man behind the camera yelled, "Whoa, holy shit!"

Suddenly, I had to leave.

“Watch my weapon.” I leaned into James, setting my hand on his arm.

He nodded and reached his foot out to pull the weapon closer, scraping it against the floor. I tried to stand up without disturbing the class. My chair screeched against the floor and knocked over my lieutenant’s water bottle. Walking toward the door, I desperately tried to be quiet. At the back of the tent, I opened the door to the heat of the day, as if opening an oven to check on a baking cake.

Walking back to our tents, my lieutenant, the only other person in the unit as thankful for the time to read as I was, sidled up beside me. She was on her third deployment to Iraq, and her husband was already in country. Most families only had to worry about being apart for a year, but their schedules had lined up so that they wouldn’t be home at the same time for almost two.

“Still sick?” she asked.

“Yeah, sorry I knocked over your water bottle.”

“I thought you Iowans never got sick. Now I got the sickest kids in the unit.”

“I know, right?”

“Just keep drinking water,” she said. “And try not to shit yourself.”

“Thanks, LT.”

Sweat formed beneath the lining of my hat before rolling down the sides of my face. It gathered around the M16 slung over my back before spreading over my entire body. A pool collected at the top of my knee-high wool socks.

Not yet in Iraq and my body was failing.